

The other side of Bhutan

Bhutan may have become accessible by road and air but getting into the kingdom is still difficult; visas are granted to only a select few. For scholars and others who do manage to wangle an invitation, it is a privilege with many attendant rewards. Wealthy tourists who pay hefty fees to visit the country might get guided tours and bragging rights, but lucky scholars invited by the regime get all this plus access to restricted information and hard-to-meet sources, interviews with ministers and top officials, and an audience with the monarch. Understandably, not many are willing to give up these hard-won privileges easily and foreigners invited to visit Bhutan to hear (and tell) the government's version of any story will seldom destroy their chances for repeat visits by coming away with a conscience and the urge to listen to what the 'other side' has to say. Michael Hutt chose to be an exception.

There are over 100,000 refugees from southern Bhutan languishing in UNHCR-administered refugee camps in southwestern Nepal. The majority was forced out or fled Bhutan in mid-1992 "when as many as 600 people arrived every day". It was in September of that year when the exodus from southern Bhutan was at its peak, that Hutt, who was then planning the first-ever international conference on Bhutan (Bhutan: A Traditional Order and the Forces of Change, SOAS, London, March 1993), spent two weeks in the kingdom as a special guest of the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB). The preface in *Unbecoming Citizens* has some vignettes of this trip. In Chirang district, the authorities conveniently arranged witnesses as evidence of 'voluntary' emigration: "They would even dismantle their

houses, the dzongda* claimed, in order to re-use the timber in refugee camps in Jhapa". But Hutt wondered if people could leave behind their homes and simply, "if the dzongda was to be believed, pick up sticks and disappear?"

The tour, courtesy the RGOB, raised questions in the author's mind and subsequently led to his wanting to visit the refugee camps in Nepal to seek answers. Till then, he had not met a single refugee. It is



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reviewed by **Bhim Subba**

to Hutt's credit that he chose to follow his instincts to find out who the refugees were and why they left their homes and country. *Unbecoming Citizens* is the result. The book does not point fingers nor does it propose a real solution - what it does is trace the history of the Lhotshampa (the Southern Bhutanese) 'minority' in Bhutan and the changing definition of nationalism by a 'majority' which sought to exclude them and eventually caused their departure.

The single quotes above are necessary because the composition of the Bhutanese population is contested terrain. Even though the gov-

ernment has had an excellent system of counting heads (because of the labour contribution system) census data has always remained a closely guarded secret resulting in wide fluctuations in population breakdown estimates. The range for the percentage of ngalongs from the western part of the country - politically dominant but an acknowledged minority - varies from 10 to 28 but probably lies closer to 16-18 per cent; figures for sharchops in the eastern half of the kingdom, including the central region east of the Black Mountain range, vary between 30 and 44 and probably is around 38-40 per cent; estimates of the Southern Bhutanese population fluctuates between 25 and 53 but was probably around 42-44 percent before the refugee problem. The first officially published total population figure was 930,614 in 1969, but it was the figure of 1.035 million that was officially submitted that year to the UN, while joining the organisation, that grew annually to reflect the growth rate to reach nearly one and a half million by 1990. Everyone knew this was not true and in 1990 (before the exodus of refugees), the king disclosed in an interview that the actual population of the country was closer to 600,000. Tellingly, Bhutan's *Human Development Report, 2000*, puts the Bhutanese population in 1998 at 636,499, a figure that would fall short by approximately the number of refugees if 600,000 were to rise at a growth rate of around 2.6 per cent.

This review of *Unbecoming Citizens* must be read with one thing in mind - it is written by someone the government of Bhutan has labeled a criminal who has betrayed the trust of the king, country and government. This blemish might not matter much in any case, however, because the book would have already failed the regime's tests of loyalty and truth, even from a foreigner. By repeatedly refusing to grant a visa to the author once he

*Dzongda or dzongdag is the district administrator.

had made clear his intentions to hear out the refugees (other academics/journalists who have committed the same mistake have faced a similar fate) the government made known its own position: you are now against 'us' because you have chosen to listen to 'them'. For the regime in Bhutan there are clearly no two sides to a coin - anyone trying to attempt a balanced analysis by listening to both sides is totally shut out. Sadly, it is this attitude which stands in the way of more inclusive policies in the kingdom and the resolution of the refugee problem.

But despite certain government disapproval over some of the findings of the author and the views expressed by many of the informants in the book, *Unbecoming Citizens* will undoubtedly be read widely in Thimphu. Every Bhutanese is aware that past Western scholarship on Bhutan has tended towards "essentialization, exoticization and totalization" and deliberately "focused almost exclusively on [Drukpa Kagyu Buddhist] culture". Hutt provides evidence of this by referring to the 260-page school history textbook commissioned by the government in 1980. The textbook makes a single reference to the Nepali-speaking population in southern Bhutan which, it says, constitutes 'about 25 per cent of the population' and, Hutt observes, "never mentions them again".

Scholars and journalists dependent on the RGOB's goodwill for research in Bhutan have carefully crafted their work to suit the regime's needs and expectations. Even the Berkeley scholar Leo E Rose who made some very astute observations about southern Bhutan and Southern Bhutanese in his excellent book, *Politics of Bhutan* (1977), was compelled to immediately qualify these with explanatory comments. Michael Hutt, who is a Reader in Nepali and Himalayan Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, is not similarly constrained. Written outside of the polite parameters - or 'lax-



A sitdown with His Majesty is appreciated.

manrekha' - defined by the regime, it is the first authoritative work that looks at the history of the country's large but neglected population in its South. It is unfortunate that because of the circumstances it had to be constructed within the refugee context but the book will, nevertheless, become a must-read for anyone professing an interest in Bhutan and Bhutanese matters.

Land receipts and subjecthood

Hutt depends mostly on records from British India stocked in London to date and unravels the story of the migration and settlement of Nepalis in southern Bhutan. He weaves this information around the legend of Garjaman Gurung, who, together with his father Dalchan Gurung, was jointly granted settlement rights to most of present-day Samchi district in perpetuity in 1887 by the then ruler of Western Bhutan in Paro. Hutt also delves into the composite memory of many refugees and old documents in their possession to explore the conditions in Bhutan and the changing relationship between the new settlers and the rulers. The book moves chronologically to cover the events and history of southern Bhutan as its people are seen at first merely as a means to generate revenue for the rulers and are kept at arms length, then as equal citizens and partners in nation-building, and finally a

threat to the nation's survival.

As Nepali settlers filled up Samchi during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and Chirang in the first few decades of the twentieth, the former was administered by the Gurung family on behalf of the Paro Ponlop and the latter by the Dorje family, from Haa in western Bhutan but based in Kalimpong in India, for the Tongsa Ponlop. Ponlop or penlop, literally 'lord-teacher', were regional administrators in a theocratic system of administration established in the seventeenth century by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651) the unifier of the country who fled from Ralung monastery in Tibet and entered Bhutan following a reincarnation/succession dispute in 1616. After his death, the news of which was kept secret for five decades, the country went through years of instability and turmoil as different families sought to take control. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Paro and Tongsa ponlops were the only dominant forces. But with the help of Ugen Dorje in Kalimpong (Bhutanese territory ceded to the British in 1865 following the Duars War), the Tongsa Ponlop Ugen Wangchuck was able to forge ties with the powerful British who eventually helped him ascend the throne as the first hereditary monarch on December 17, 1907. The administration of the country was through "a three-

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tiered system" which "was designed primarily for the purposes of taxation". Even after the country was unified under the Wangchucks in 1907, this system continued until the 1960s. Justice was imparted and revenue collected at the local level by *thekadars* (contractors) with the help of *mandals* (village headmen), *karbaris* (headmen's assistants) and *baidars* (clerks). This administrative system was quite distinct from the rest of the country and involved detailed censuses and record-keeping. Unlike in the North, taxes were paid in cash and many of the refugees have in their possession to this day receipts issued during the early part of the twentieth century. The survival of these old documents "among illiterate farming communities in a monsoon climate is evidence of an early bureaucratization of this administrative system and the settlers' cognizance of the importance of such documents".

In the absence of literature on Bhutan generally ("the ordinary people of the north were under-represented in the accounts of Bhutanese history and culture") and southern Bhutan in particular ("the people of the south were practically invisible"), old tax receipts could perhaps be used as windows to the past, their detailed scrutiny allowing a rough reconstruction of the history of South Bhutan. In his own brief survey of such documents in the refugee camps, Hutt saw "at least seven different varieties of tax receipts, each of which could be assigned to a distinct period". For instance, the oldest receipt he identified was for an amount of Rs 8 as house tax dated 1907, the year hereditary monarchy was first established. This says three things: at the time the first king was crowned on December 17, 1907, there were permanent tax-paying Nepali settlers in the South; there was an effective bureaucracy in control in the South (in the North taxes were collected only in kind until 1954 and total conversion to a cash system was accomplished only in 1964); the tax rate was significant considering that

the entire annual non-tax revenue of the country at that time amounted to just Rs 50,000 granted as a 'subsidy' by British India following the annexation of the Duars plains in 1865.

The tax receipts which appear to have been generally standardised by the 1920s had provisions for household tax, tax on irrigated and dry fields, cows, buffalo, sheep, gun license fee, other fines, and so on. These may also tell their story indicating where, for example, animal husbandry might have been more common than agriculture. For instance, on the basis of such receipts the author is able to date the introduction of southern Bhutan's main cash crops, orange and cardamom, to the early 1950s. Taxes were collected and receipts issued by mandals under the authority of individuals/families wielding the real power. Thus, even though all of Bhutan came under hereditary monarchy in 1907, for half a century the kings seemed to have had little influence or control over the South. The perception in the South of the relative ranks of the Dorjes and the king "seems to have mirrored the situation in Nepal where a Rana Maharaja was effectively in control of the kingdom from 1846 to 1951 while the king's role was largely ceremonial".

Receipts in Chirang continued to be issued under the authority of the Dorjes while those in Samchi were issued by the Gurung family. Revenue was deposited in Kalimpong and Paro (where a supporter/representative of the Wangchucks had replaced the earlier ruling family around 1906) until 1958 when the central government finally began collecting taxes directly. The language used for receipts and other official documents in South Bhutan tell one more significant story - reflecting the changing attitudes of the government, Nepali gave way to Nepali/English which in turn was replaced by English/Dzongkha and finally Dzongkha became the language in use for official communication by the 1990s.

Conditions for belonging

The story of southern Bhutan is the story of Nepalis in Bhutan. The ethnic boundary with an imaginary line delineating a Nepali zone in the south exclusively for Nepalese settlers, Hutt says, is an accident of history and reflects a "competition over natural resources" which "has since been invested with a loftier role" of protecting an endangered Buddhist state. The near-total isolation of the two communities was convenient in the pre-modern era when new settlers wanted nothing more than the right to live peacefully off the land and, in turn, the rulers were satisfied with the taxes they received. In the absence of a welfare system, there were no additional obligations or expectations on either side (although the settlers also formed a buffer zone that was mutually beneficial to both Bhutan and the British). Indeed, in an era when citizens were merely a means to earn revenue, Kathmandu's government initiated a campaign offering free land, tax exemptions and amnesties to entice Nepalis from southern Bhutan to return to settle in the newly opened up areas in the southeastern area of Morang. This compelled Bhutan to complain to the British that Nepal was wooing its 'subjects'. Half a century later these same 'subjects' were being forced to leave.

Between the intervening period of wanting the Southern Bhutanese to stay and leave, Bhutan went from being an undeveloped country without schools, hospitals, electricity, telephone or a single kilometre of motorable road to a country with all the modern trappings - education and public health facilities, a network of roads, an airline, and electricity to spare. The development process that transformed the kingdom was initiated by the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1928-1972). It was during his reign that the main institutions of state were established, beginning with the Tsongkhpa, or national assembly, in 1953. This was followed by other changes including land reforms, abolishing of serfdom, introduction

of education and health facilities, setting up of a modern administrative machinery and a cabinet of ministers, and so on.

Starting in the early 1960s, the country as a whole began to be governed as one with a common administrative system although different provisions were still retained where needed for the special requirements of the South. But the most significant reform was the granting of nationality by royal decree at the end of 1958 to all Southern Bhutanese. No doubt the third King was a visionary leader, but Hutt may have done a disservice by ignoring the role of his brother-in-law and Prime Minister Jigmi Palden Dorje, the son of Raja ST Dorje and grandson of Ugen Dorje, the Bhutan Agents for the British in Kalimpong, considered by many to be the principal architect of these reforms.

Southern Bhutanese contributed to the nation-building process. The 173-km road from the Indian border to Thimphu, the capital, will always remain in the collective memory of Southern Bhutanese.

Building the infrastructure for a modern state needed workers, and in a form of labour conscription where one in every three adults was required to be at the government worksite, between 1961 and 1966, every person between 17 and 55 years had to spend four months each year working on this road. The rotation was decided by the mandals and karbaris. It was the responsibility of anyone unable to report for work for whatever reason to send a replacement. The people living in the refugee camps remember this highway as the material evidence of their contribution to the building of modern Bhutan.

Within two and a half decades from the time Southern Bhutanese were granted nationality, Bhutan was transformed. The spurt of development activities brought the North in contact with a region and people with whom it had till then been deliberately kept apart. During

this relatively brief period the three communities came closer. In the first half of the 1980s, the government even actively promoted a process of accelerated assimilation to nurture a sense of belonging among the Southern Bhutanese. But even as this modern Bhutan was taking shape, Hutt writes, "the Lhotshampas' growing confidence and influence came to be seen as a threat to the ethicized order of power" and the "nature of its likely sociopolitical consequences came clearly into view" forcing the government to "adjust the constitution and consistency of the pluralism upon which the modernizing forces were begin-



The Lhotshampa exiles remember the road to Thimphu.

ning to act". Hutt explores the resultant changing "conditions for belonging" that were gradually introduced and analyses "the process of decay".

Nationalism

The decision to construct a protective shell around one culture meant that the 'other' had to be subjugated or expelled. The die was cast once the rulers in Thimphu adopted such a policy, "labeled 'nationalism' and defined as 'the desire of a state to have a nation of its own', as distinct from nationalism, 'the desire of a nation to have a state of its own'". Conditions for citizenship were gradually made more restrictive with each new Citizenship Act and this largely affected the new immigrants in the South (under the 1958 Act - a child born of a Bhutanese parent was a citizen; 1977 - a child born of a Bhutanese father was a citizen; 1985 - a child born of Bhutanese parents was a citizen). At the same time the state also adopted the dangerous concept of homogenised nationalism where some Bhutanese came to be seen as more authentic than the rest. The culture of the North was promoted at the cost of all others. This had a greater impact on the lives of people in southern Bhutan where the language, culture and traditions are completely different. (The culture in the East is the same as that in the West even though the language is different.) Together, the two formed a lethal combination as far as the Southern Bhutanese were concerned.

The retroactive application of the different Citizenship Acts and impossible requirements set out during the census exercise of 1988 to prove their bona fides (submission of 1958 tax receipts) in tandem with strict enforcement of the government's new cultural policies naturally led to resistance in the South. At a time when their right to nationality seemed to be under threat, the introduction of a compulsory dress code as part of

Driglam Namzha (which Michael Aris, the renowned Bhutan scholar, described as 'elaborate choreography of deference'), removal of the Nepali language from the primary school curriculum, and a proposal for a green belt along the border that would have made at least a third of all Southern Bhutanese homeless, appeared to be deliberately timed. "Thus, by 1990 the Lhotshampas found themselves subject to a range of cultural rules and restrictions regarding dress, language, ceremonial etiquette and many other aspects of everyday life".

In September-October 1990, Bhutan witnessed the first-ever mass uprising when thousands of protestors converged on administrative offices across the South. Both sides, however, played up the size of the revolt, the government to indicate how it was being threatened and the dissidents to claim it had everyone's support. If there was any hope that

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this show of strength would lead to a change in government policy, these were belied when a total clampdown followed, destroying any chance of rapprochement. By the end of the year, the flow of refugees had begun, first to Assam and West Bengal in India and later into Nepal.

Unbecoming Citizens also covers ground touched by more recent literature, looking at the events prior to and following the demonstrations, the dissident 'movement', and the role of the main actors involved. It will be difficult to find a better analysis of these sensitive latter-day developments anywhere else, but it is for the historical construction of the migration of Nepalis into South Bhutan and the recording of their history from their settlement to expulsion that the book is valuable. The story of a people, many of them now in their thirteenth year of exile, is pieced together from the impersonal writings of British Indian civil servants, the legend of Garjaman Gurung, the life history of 70-year-old Dil Maya (not her real name), and a huge cast of unnamed refugees who shared their memories of the land they call home.

Many of his informants, Hutt says, were anxious to tell their story in the hope that somehow this would solve their problems. Unfortunately, no book, however powerful, can compel a government to change its policies or a people to change their attitudes, particularly when these attitudes have hardened. But a book can spark debate and can make the reader reflect. It is this reviewer's hope that friends in Bhutan in high places who engendered or contributed to building this new, non-inclusive Bhutan, and who will quite certainly find the time to read *Unbecoming Citizens*, will learn from this book and see why, where and how they might have gone wrong. Perhaps there is still time to try and repair the "tear in the fabric".